

Uriel Orlow *Unmade Film*

John Hansard Gallery, Southampton 3 March – 25 April

The reelection of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister of Israel, a depressing event that emphasised his rejection of a Palestinian state, made it a timely moment to see Uriel Orlow's installation, which focuses on the historically contested site that is Deir Yassin, near Jerusalem. His *Unmade Film* is exactly that – a sequence of rooms that contain what might be construed as the basic materials for a movie: so we are presented with a storyboard, a script, some stills, a voiceover, the staging, the closing credits and so on. Deir Yassin is the site of dual trauma – firstly the massacre of its Palestinian inhabitants by Zionist paramilitary forces in 1948 and then, shortly after this, the establishment of Kfar Sha'ul, a psychiatric institution that cared for Holocaust victims, including Orlow's great-aunt, who had survived Auschwitz. Orlow considers these two events as instances of wilful ignorance, where one horrific event conceals another. *Unmade Film* notes the lack of any commemorative plaque on the site regarding the Palestinian victims of the Nakba, while concurrently Orlow recalls the desolate atmosphere he encountered when visiting the forgotten mentally ill from the East European camps. We witness stills of empty seats where patients once sat, their presence mute, a reminder of the unconsolated. In another room we can listen through headphones to a sad

soundtrack of Arabic music. But where does this take us, the witnesses here of the unwitnessed? The impossibility of comparison, of doing justice to the two histories, is Orlow's subject and hence his reasoning behind the blasted, fragmentary form of his project.

We might paraphrase Brad Prager, from his excellent *After the Fact: The Holocaust in Twenty First Century Documentary Film* (2015), in order to sum up Orlow's dilemma: 'picturing the Holocaust's [or Deir Yassin's] horrors diminishes them, turns them into kitsch, and prolongs the treacherous illusion that it is possible, from our standpoint, to comprehend what took place'. Orlow's dismantling of the filmic apparatus into its elements is properly Brechtian, and one imagines he shares Brecht's concern to, in some way, politicise his audience. What has happened, he implies, is wrong, is beyond irony and requires correction. The artistic method Orlow uses here is montage and recalls the great modernist literary experimentations of Joyce and Döblin. And yet there is, as with the strictures of Claude Lanzmann, director of the magisterial documentary *Shoah* (1985), around Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), a rejection of reconstruction, of the risks of fictive manoeuvring. But there remains the risk to the status of *Unmade Film* as a work itself with such disruption, that we end up with eroded

fragments that fail to gel into any coherent sense of impact as art.

The unmade film project as an object in itself has antecedents, as with the volume of notes relating to Stanley Kubrick's life of Napoleon, or, and of more relevance to Orlow's work given its subject matter, Jane and Louise Wilson's art about unfinished art videowork *Unfolding the Aryan Papers* (2009), which speculated on another of Kubrick's plans, his unrealised take on the Holocaust.

And yet while accusations of kitsch for a realised film are nigh on unavoidable when discussing the unimaginable horrors of the period, performances can still be powerful, can still qualify as art, even if the totality of the project remains something of a failure. Consider Paul Schrader's movie *Adam Resurrected* (2008), based on Yoram Kaniuk's book and set in a fictional Israeli psychiatric hospital for survivors not dissimilar to Kfar Sha'ul. Despite the scepticism of many, actors and actresses remain key to the success of cinema as art. While Orlow's work has some staged choreography, it has no thespian performances to speak of as striking as Jeff Goldblum in the titular role of Schrader's movie. Orlow's acute sensitivities unsurprisingly avoid the chance of imaginative, fictive failure, but isn't that what art must risk?

John Quin



Unmade Film, 2015 (installation view).
Photo: Steve Shrimpton. Courtesy the artist